

Community Supports and the Early Childhood Development Initiative

“We have reached a critical moment as a society with regard to the life prospects of the next generation. At a time when concern about the life quality and life opportunity of children and youth is increasing, we find ourselves with diminishing resources to support child development and family life, as well as with nagging doubts about the benefits of many of our traditional strategies and approaches.

“Given the convergence of these three trends – increasing concern, decreasing resources and nagging doubts – communities are faced with essentially three choices in their efforts to provide support to children and families.

“They can continue to do what they have been doing, and hope to get by, or they can attempt to find ways to strengthen their current supports to families by tinkering with the existing system, or they can engage in a community process to fundamentally rethink the use of existing resources.”

Craig Shields, 1995

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**Canadian Association of Family
Resource Programs**

**L'Association canadienne des programmes
de ressources pour la famille**

707-331 rue Cooper Street
Ottawa (Ontario) K2P 0G5
Tel./Tél : (613) 237-7667; Fax/Télé : (613) 237-8515
www.frp.ca; info@frp.ca



This position paper builds on two previous submissions from the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada):

“Family Support A National Priority, a Response to the Public Report ‘Public Dialogue on the National Children’s Agenda—Developing a Shared Vision,’” (July 2000) and

“Parenting and Family Supports: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric Together” (July 2001).

This third position paper, **Community Supports and the Early Child Development Initiative**, focuses on the fourth key action area of the ECDI — Strengthen Community Supports.

Who we are

FRP Canada is a national not-for-profit organization whose mission is to provide leadership to advance social policy, research, resource development and training for those who enhance the capacity of families to raise children. We work with over two thousand family support programs/centres and related services across Canada. FRP Canada is recognized as a champion for creating strong families and communities through family-centred innovative approaches.

Our definition of family support

Family support programs are community-based organizations working with children, families and caregivers to enhance strengths, to build capacities and to promote healthy development.

Family support programs deliver a range of services guided by principles that focus on building supportive relationships, facilitating growth, respecting diversity and furthering community development.

Family support programs vary greatly depending on their size, mandate and resources. Services are flexible, accessible and offered in an informal atmosphere. These services may be provided in partnership with other groups. Family support services include:

- child development
- community development
- community outreach
- counseling and mediation
- drop-in programs
- early learning and care
- educational upgrading
- employment assistance
- family literacy
- food and nutrition support
- parent and caregiver support
- parent education
- peer contact and mutual support
- play and recreation
- promotion of health and safety
- referrals to other resources
- toy lending

“At its core, family support is an old-fashioned way of thinking about what it takes to rear children in any society – and how that way of thinking translates into action. Family support involves nurturing and protecting children by nurturing and protecting the families who are responsible for those children’s care. It also requires strengthening families by strengthening the communities that are made up of those families. Family support provides parents and neighbourhoods with the resources and supports they need to succeed at the most important job there is: raising healthy, responsible, productive and joyous children.”

“ As a parent, I feel I am part of creating the future of society. I have often wished that in my early years as a mother I had had the kinds of support that family resource programs offer to people and communities. Family resource programs create welcoming and safe places to share worries and concerns, to gain new perspectives and to become a more effective parent. They are one of the few spaces in our communities where the value of children and family are truly acknowledged and supported.”

— Community partner, Toronto

The purpose of this document

Although the First Ministers’ Communiqué refers to strengthening community supports as one of four actions, we assert that this initiative is not a separate action on its own, but is the overarching principle of the entire Early Child Development Initiative. The supports described in the first three key areas for action,

- Promote Healthy Pregnancy, Birth and Infancy
 - Improve Parenting and Family Supports, and
 - Strengthen Early Childhood Development, Learning and Care
- are only as effective as the ways in which they are provided to families within communities.

Underlying this submission is FRP Canada’s belief that this component of the ECDI is the most important and at the same time the most difficult to address. Building the capacity of communities so that they can more effectively meet the needs of children and families is challenging. It requires creativity, commitment and resources.

In this paper we will present the family support sector’s position that Early Childhood Development Initiative funding must make a significant contribution to strengthening communities and we will recommend ways in which the ECDI can effectively encourage community support. We will discuss the importance of healthy communities, and we will identify some of the challenges of community capacity building and service integration. We will make recommendations from a family support perspective as to how the Early Childhood Development Initiative should be implemented in ways that make the best sense for Canadian families and children.



Strengthening Community Supports

“Children do not just grow up in families - they grow up in communities. Communities provide the social settings where families help young children to grow and develop. Families with young children need supportive communities to help their children reach their potential.”

“Communities make important contributions to the well being of children through formal and informal networks. They provide parents and young children with a sense of belonging. They provide the basic infrastructure where family life is lived.”

— Early Childhood Development Agreement: Report on Government of Canada Activities and Expenditures 2000-2001

Healthy Communities

Healthy communities are those that are responsive to changing community needs and that offer a range of relevant programs and services in a cohesive and planned manner. They are productive, resourceful and contribute to the well being of all in the community by valuing the opinion and participation of all key stakeholders and by investing in social capital.

“Successful communities are those that have been successful in bolstering the social outcomes of their least advantaged citizens.”

“People from less advantaged backgrounds are vulnerable, but people from less advantaged backgrounds who also live in less advantaged communities are particularly vulnerable.”

— Douglas Willms, 2001

Capacity building is about strengthening the environments that affect the lives of families and children by creating conditions that lead to successful outcomes. Initiatives developed in isolation may not be as effective as initiatives developed from a capacity building, ecological perspective. Based on population health principles, this approach to improving services is more economical in the long term than a ‘top down’ approach to planning and delivering services. For children to be able to thrive, they must live in a thriving family within a thriving community.

Both formal and informal networks at the community level are built on relationships that take time, expertise and resources to develop and nurture. No single overall approach or initiative will be the most appropriate for every community, due to the complex and diverse needs of the people living in those communities. This adds to the challenge of building healthy communities in which children and families can flourish.

There are several reasons for focusing the efforts of the ECDI at the neighbourhood level where families live. It is at this level that connections are made between families and service providers and between service providers from various sectors. Taking a community approach to service planning and integration encourages service providers and community members to take responsibility for strengthening the fabric of their own community, by asking themselves what kind of place their community is for children and families, and how services may be used to positively influence the quality of life there.

At the same time, having a community focus has its challenges. How is the community to be defined? Is it a neighbourhood, a city or a political riding? Is it defined by population demographics such as income, language or religion? When planning for change, who represents the community? Is it the school superintendent, the chief of police, the head of the regional health board and other high level community leaders, or is the community reflected at the table by a broad cross section of community residents, service providers, funders and other stakeholders? Is participation in this process determined by political connections or is it based on known ability to work collaboratively toward a shared vision?

Whatever definition is used, focusing on the community as the point of service delivery for supports to families will require leadership and resources—leadership in the form of personal vision and commitment supported by progressive policies such as those identified in the First Ministers’ communiqué, and resources to plan and implement comprehensive programs and services at the local level.

“The current trend toward empowering communities, especially in low-income neighbourhoods, tends also toward overestimating the extent to which communities can succeed if left to their own devices. It is incorrect to assume that communities can succeed in isolation, and that any government or sector ‘influence’ is inherently bad. Communities need social infrastructure, resources and support to succeed, not to mention the help of government and intermediary voluntary-sector organizations.”

— Michael Orsini, 2001

Changing Times

Today, times are especially difficult. Following the tragic events of September 11, communities are struggling to sort out priorities in a changing world. The related economic downturn has impacted upon the private sector in terms of lower profits and job losses. Major allocations for national security and defense have affected public spending budgets.

In difficult times such as these, we typically see an increase in public skepticism over spending for social services. Despite well-founded research and policies, there is a tendency to adopt the belief that social services are a drain on public resources that do not make a difference. However, in stressful, uncertain times, the resiliency of a community is directly related to its investment in human social capital.

Families in distress need more support than ever, and family support programs are the first line of defence. Family Support America reports a significant increase in the number of people turning to family support programs after September 11. In Canada, military family resource centres play an important role in assisting families to prepare for the deployment of a parent. Family support programs are a place of safety and solace and they help to contribute to a sense of community stability.

Service Integration: Enhancing Community Capacity

If, as we assert, family support programs are the first line of defence for families and children, what is the second line of defence? This second line of defence can be broadly defined as more formal systems such as child welfare, health care and social assistance. Compared to informal family support programs, these services are more structured, more costly, less accessible and less responsive to the changing needs of families, children and communities.

While services in the second line of defence play an important role in an overall framework that supports families and children, they tend to be highly professionalized with a focus on fixing problems rather than

“Most ameliorative responses consist of formal services and programs that are provided by paid professionals. This is necessary and makes good sense in many instances. But formal services are not a good substitute for the kind of informal supports that many children and families receive from family, friends and community. And this is not just because of the cost or availability of formal services. It is because informal supports work differently than formal services. They are based upon personal affiliation and mutual regard. They build on aspiration and strengths. And they can be spontaneous, resilient and ongoing. As a result, one of the greatest contributions formal services can make is to reinforce the value of informal supports, and to strengthen them wherever possible.”

— Craig Shields, 1997

preventing them. This “ameliorative” approach waits until a serious problem has been identified before making services available.

Today, ameliorative responses are facing many challenges. They are costly to manage and deliver and are more and more frequently failing to meet the needs of the communities they are intended to serve, either due to legislative and regulatory restrictions, budgetary limitations or inherent structural problems. The following comment about the child welfare system paints a discouraging picture.

“Stresses within these systems, resulting from persistent and ongoing crises, similar to stresses in families, create situations where creativity withers into conformity, idealism turns into cynicism, collective sharing dissolves into turf protection, and critical questions, challenges and new ideas are oftentimes feared and avoided.”

— Kenneth Barter, 2001

Service integration increases a community’s capacity to provide the services and supports that families need, when and where they need them. It tries to overcome systemic barriers that separate formal and informal systems and restrict access to services. In a well-integrated system of services, families can access a range of supports easily and seamlessly. The story on the facing page illustrates how integrated services can draw upon the abilities of professional and non-professional helpers in ways that are both effective and cost-efficient.

Often, funders require the participation of multiple partners in projects without acknowledging the skills, time and effort that go into building and sustaining partnerships. In order for integrated services to work, a myriad of formal and informal arrangements involving different service providers and organizations in the community must be worked out. Successful collaboration and integration of services requires time, patience, relationship building and ongoing evaluation and accountability—to participants, partnering organizations, communities and funders.

A familiar story

In the early days after her baby's birth, Carol, who is worried about breastfeeding, uses a number she was given in **the hospital** to call the **community parent-child warmline**. She is encouraged to attend a **breastfeeding clinic** located at a neighbourhood **family resource program**. The **public health nurse** who is staffing the clinic that afternoon provides information and encouragement about breastfeeding and gives Carol a package of materials about the family resource program which includes a flyer about a weekly **post partum depression support group**.

Six weeks later, the baby's father, Doug, is beginning to worry about Carol's mental health and **he** calls the centre to talk to the **facilitator** of the post partum depression support group. Doug gets some information about post partum depression and about ways **he can be helpful**. Carol and the baby are invited to come to the weekly post partum depression support group. At the support group, **another mother** mentions the name of **a specialist** who is very knowledgeable and supportive regarding post partum depression and **Carol** decides to make an appointment to seek medical help.

Two months later, when Carol is beginning to feel much better, she brings her baby to the **centre's drop-in**, meets the **drop-in coordinator**, talks to **another mother** with a baby the same age, and arranges to borrow some **toys, a video** on baby massage and **a book** entitled Your Baby's First Year. When she decides a few months later to work part-time at home, she makes a flexible child care arrangement with a **home child care provider** whom she has observed a number of times at the **playgroup** with two children in her care. Her son continues to come to the centre with the caregiver, and the mother still visits the centre with him occasionally.

When their active toddler is about two and a half, Carol and Doug enroll in an eight-week evening **parenting course** that they found through listings in the **free community newspaper** for families...

“To be successful, partnerships require more than vision alone. They need leadership and management skills. Since cooperation can be more challenging than independent action, partnerships should not be considered a trivial undertaking.”

“Collaboration results in easier, faster, and more coherent access to services and benefits and in greater effects on systems. Working together is not a substitute for adequate funding, although the synergistic efforts of the collaborating partners often result in creative ways to overcome obstacles.”

— Caledon Institute, 1998

Family support program responds to teens' need for health services

“In our rural community we have a higher than average rate of teen pregnancy. We formed a coalition of community partners to take a closer look at teen health. We conducted a survey of local youth and found that there was a demand for a confidential health clinic. We looked at models in similar communities in the Maritimes and found one in Nova Scotia. We applied for funding from the local hospital, met with public health, family physicians and the MLA's in our area. They supported the funding proposal and we opened the Young Adult Health Centre at our local high school on September 7, 2001. The Teen Health Coalition still functions and has undertaken numerous other projects for teens.”

Family Support Program Director, Woodstock, New Brunswick

How Family Support Programs Build Community Capacity

Family support programs actively contribute to the health of their communities. They operate from a strength-based perspective and facilitate change in their participants in a positive manner. The First Ministers' Communiqué acknowledges the valuable role these programs can play in improving parenting and family supports and contributing to the overall health of communities.

Family support programs represent a framework of existing programs and services that act as a barometer of the community. They are sensitive to factors that impact on families and they are aware of emerging trends. Family support programs are by their nature adaptable and creative. They are practised at solving problems in new ways. Family support programs invite community residents to take an active part in shaping the services they want. They act as a catalyst by helping diverse stakeholders to find common ground through formal and informal partnerships established to address specific needs.

Similarly, the Early Childhood Development Initiative has served as a catalyst for policy-makers to begin exploring new ways of doing business, using family support as a strategy for changing and improving publicly-supported services for children and families.

“Early results from the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth show that determinants of child development have an impact at all levels of social aggregation: family, neighbourhood, community and economy. This underlines the importance of a strategy that is not only intersectoral, but also multi-level, and has strong local leadership.”

— Clyde Hertzman, 2000

“Children thrive within families and communities that can meet their physical and developmental needs and can provide security, nurturing, respect and love.”

— First Ministers’ Meeting Communiqué on Early Childhood Development, 2000



Summary and Recommendations

A healthy community is one in which all levels of government—federal, provincial and municipal—are communicating in a meaningful way.

- ✓ **We recommend** more dialogue between ministries and between sectors. A broad range of stakeholders needs to be at the table for meaningful planning and coordination to take place.

Healthy communities have responsive, innovative services that address families’ needs where they live.

- ✓ **We recommend** that primary support services be accessible to all families.

Community collaborations need to be initiated and planned by the communities themselves.

- ✓ **We recommend** that ongoing planning, coordination and evaluation efforts need to be supported at the local level and should include all stakeholders, so that the planning process is ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down.’

Successful service integration can result in better use of resources and more positive impacts at the community level.

- ✓ **We recommend** that any initiatives aimed at service integration must lead to more effective services for children and families and not to increased levels of bureaucracy and administration.

Positive outcomes in communities can only be achieved over the long term.

- ✓ **We recommend** that funding for the Early Childhood Development Initiative be extended beyond the five year period of the agreement.

Short-term investments in communities will not result in a long-term reduction in social costs and overall economic benefits.

- ✓ **We recommend** that the ECDI should not be influenced by short-term political agendas at the provincial or local level, but must reflect an ongoing will to build capacity at the community level.

Any new initiatives that are developed must contribute to the long-term health and capacity of communities.

- ✓ **We recommend** that the federal government and its partners must develop appropriate evaluation and accountability mechanisms to ensure that new initiatives developed as a result of the ECDI are, in fact, contributing to the long-term health and capacity of communities and not simply resulting in new levels of bureaucracy.

Family support organizations are the ‘barometers’ of the community.

- ✓ **We recommend** that the federal government and its partners work with family support organizations to monitor the impacts of the ECDI at the local level.

Results and timelines will vary from community to community.

- ✓ **We recommend** that accountability mechanisms need to reflect overall performance as well as unique differences and that communities need to be assured of stable resources to support the development or continuation of evaluation of a continuum of service.

In times of economic downturns, governments must resist the impulse to cut funding to supportive services.

- ✓ **We recommend** that in times of uncertainty and greater need, social programs receive additional funding to cope with increased demands for service.

Ongoing funding will be required to sustain community collaborations.

- ✓ **We recommend** that the federal government and its partners must begin a process now to ensure the sustainability of this funding into the future.

Even informal services, such as family support programs, need adequate funding.

- ✓ **We recommend** that family support programs need substantial incremental funding to continue to support families and act as catalysts and facilitators in the community development process.

“Over time, community based initiatives and investment in early childhood development and support for parenting pay off. They help children develop to their potential, so that they become adults with better competence and coping abilities.”

— Early Childhood Development Agreement: Report on Government of Canada Activities and Expenditures 2000-2001



In Conclusion

The intent of the ECDI to improve circumstances for children and families and to effect change in communities is to be applauded. However, as we have shown, this change needs to be cohesive, meaningful and ecological. Although the approaches may vary from community to community, the overall intent must be to enhance the well being of children, in the context of the well being of families, and in turn in the context of their communities. The initiative should not be used as an opportunity to build new silos of service or to add layers of government bureaucracy.

“Integrated early childhood development programs should create holistic environments for young children and their families. They should integrate existing program pieces across education, social services and health sectors. They should also combine programs and resources from federal, provincial and local governments.”

— Clyde Hertzman, 2000

Adequate resources need to be made available for this coordinated approach to improving capacity in communities. However, dollars alone are not the answer. In order for this approach to work there has to be a commitment on all levels that families and children need access to a range of support services at various times in the life cycle and that these services need to be community-based, accessible and responsive. This is the overarching intent of the ECDI—the challenge is to implement this well-intentioned initiative in a way that makes good use of the available resources, and builds on the strengths and systems already in place.

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**Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs
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Anna-Marie Leblanc Hayes, New Brunswick (President)
(506) 328-3522

Colette Bédard, Québec
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Local associations

Toronto Association of Family Resource Programmes

Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs

Alla Ivask
Executive Director
(613) 237-7667, ext. 223

Janice MacAulay
Coordinator, Information and Project Development
(613) 237-7667, ext. 222